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The Gathering Climate of Negotiation

NOT since he became President had Richard Nixon made such extensive preparations for possible negotiations with Hanoi. He reached his office at the Western White House in San Clemente before 8 every morning last week. In a mood of quiet intensity, he conferred frequently with Secretary of State William Rogers, CIA Director Richard Helms and Alexander M. Haig, Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs. Every phrase of the Communists' recent seven-point peace proposal, as well as a subsequent New York *Times* interview with Special North Vietnamese Envoy Le Duc Tho, was scrutinized for what it might reveal.

Cryptic Mission. At the same time the President received a steady flow of information from emissaries abroad. David Bruce, chief U.S. negotiator in Paris, kept him up to date on the peace talks. Henry Kissinger reported back from meetings in South Viet Nam, Thailand, India and Pakistan, and was scheduled to go to Paris at week's end. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird spent the week in Japan, where he stressed the fact that his hosts must assume a greater share of the defense burden in the Pacific once the U.S. withdraws from Viet Nam. This week he goes to South Korea to discuss the ramifications of withdrawal. Vice President Agnew was in Saudi Arabia, fourth stop on his 32-day, ten-nation itinerary. More cryptic about his mission, Agnew's purpose seems to be to reassure the friendly, if conservative, nations he visits that the U.S. was not slipping irretrievably leftward under the pressures of Viet Nam.

The new Communist moves are taken all the more seriously because of the number of secret meetings with Hanoi that led up to them. For the past three months, Kissinger has demanded a vast amount of analysis from the National Security Council staff, the State Department and the CIA—the stuff of a major presidential review. Not coincidentally, Tho invited Kissinger to have a private chat with him in Paris. What Kissinger brings home to the President from that meeting may well be decisive.

Until it ties together these various diplomatic strands, the White House will not make a counterproposal to Hanoi. But the outline of one is beginning to emerge. If the prospects look favorable, Nixon is expected to go on TV in about two weeks and give the Communists a reply. He may agree to a linkage of a withdrawal date for American forces with the release of American prisoners of war—the major new proposal made by Hanoi in its seven-point program. Heretofore Hanoi had only agreed to discuss the prisoners after the U.S. set a withdrawal date. But he is likely to want all prisoners home before the withdrawals are completed, and to remain skeptical about the other points, which are largely restatements of Communist positions still considered unacceptable:

- The Communists want the U.S. to withdraw troops and equipment completely from South Viet Nam, while the President insists on maintaining a small advisory staff as well as continuing military aid.
- The North demands that the Thieu regime be dumped; the U.S. insists that only the South Vietnamese can change their government.
- The North Vietnamese have said that they are willing to observe a cease-fire with departing American troops, but the U.S. favors a general cease-fire that will bring the war to an end.
- The Communists have made it clear that their offer is limited to South Viet Nam only, while Nixon wants an overall Indochina settlement.
- American P.O.W.s in Laos and Cambodia would not be included in the package and could still be used as pawns by the North Vietnamese.

Using the P.O.W.s. All these points could conceivably be negotiated, but the question is how much room the President will have in which to bargain. To date, the North Vietnamese have given away nothing; as they talk, they continue to send troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, despite 15 inches of rain in a week. As always, they estimate that time is on their side, that they will wear down a war-weary American public before they are forced to make any significant concessions. "It's ingenious," says a high-ranking American diplomat. "And it's all very cleverly done in a soft and so-reasonable sounding tone." The Hanoi proposal offers the American public what it most wants out of the war: the return of the prisoners.

In part the Administration has only itself to blame for its own predicament. In an effort to drum up support for his Viet Nam policies, Nixon was the first to tie the release of the P.O.W.s to U.S. withdrawal. The Communists in due course have cannily taken him up on it. "We dug our own grave," says a State Department analyst. "They're using the P.O.W.s to get everything else."

Nixon is now trying to steel the public to wait out negotiations. The President worries that the American reaction to

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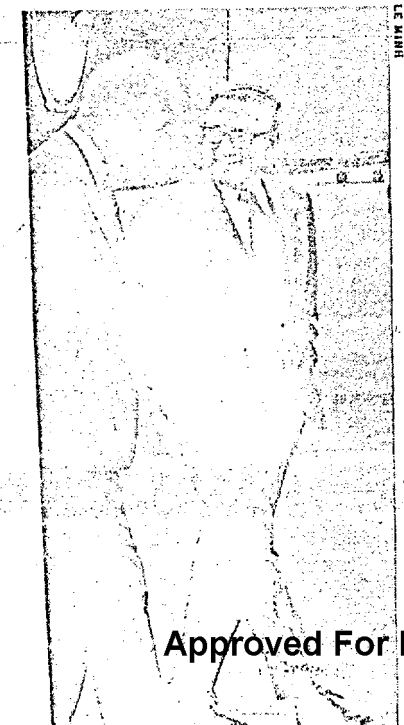

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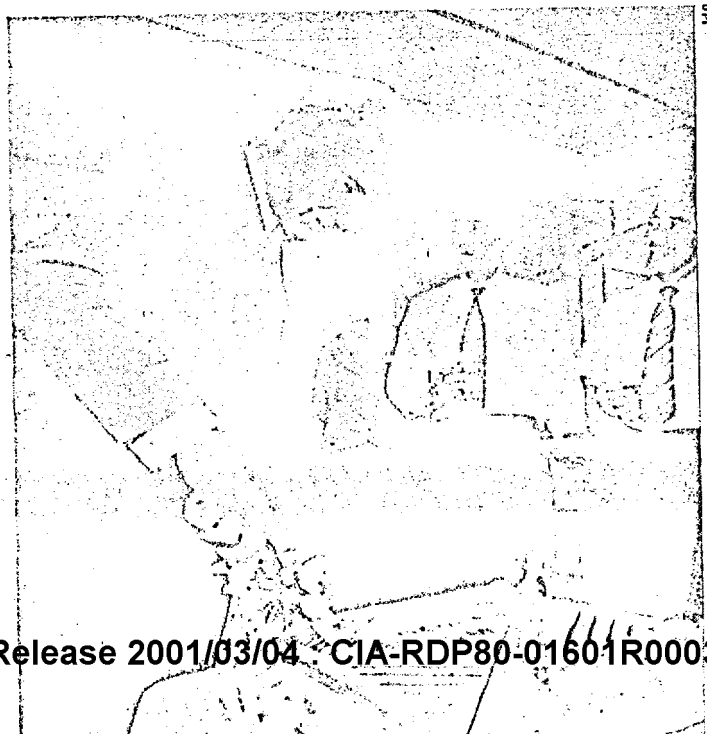

LAIRD ARRIVING IN TOKYO